

Luncheon with British Defense Minister Peter Thorneycroft

November 1, 1962

Thorneycroft spoke to a luncheon of the American correspondents. No attribution.

Before the lunch Thorneycroft told me of his great admiration for General Norstad, although he has disagreed with Norstad on the "tactical nuclear" force which the latter is demanding. He thinks Norstad a very broad-gauged fellow, however. Norstad has been particularly right, in Thorneycroft's opinion, in playing down the Berlin crisis and refusing to get excited -- even though this may have caused him some difficulties in Washington.

Thorneycroft also said that the United States had consulted Britain all that it could in the Cuban crisis; Britain had responded with full support, which is what is expected of an ally in the circumstances.

It would be foolish to offer American bases in Europe in any trade with the Warsaw Pact at this point. The strategic air command still thinks them important. Of course the Thor missiles already have been scheduled for removal and thus cannot be traded. Thorneycroft also is sceptical about going very far in abolishing Turkish bases, although he says that the Jupiter missiles are not worth much at this point.

Curiously, there already has been a certain amount of disengagement in Europe, in that neither side has intermediate range missiles close to the East-West line. Western missiles are all back Italy or on the fringes of Europe; and Soviet missiles are well withdrawn from Germany. Nevertheless, we never ought to forget, that the Soviet Union has an enormous concentration of missile power aimed at Western Europe as well as at the United States.

Formal Talk Thorneycroft was very interested in seeing American missile establishments on his recent trip, particularly the launchers at Cape Canaveral. He noted that the bigger ones were pointed less towards Russia and more towards the moon -- with some satisfaction.

In the events of the last few days, the lesson which the British people can draw is that the United States of America is both tough and capable of keeping its head in a crisis. This has come across. We shan't come into a position of safety in our own lifetimes. But the allies stood together. We in Britain play our part by not seeking to interfere with the American decision and then by supporting it. This is the real test of an alliance. We reject the criticism that there was inadequate consultation. The world is now marginally in a better position than it has been in many similar crises.

What do you think was the Russian motivation? I don't know. I cannot think that those operatives thought this one out without the meticulous care chess players usually use. It may be that Khrushchev himself doubted the operation. The withdrawal finally was

brilliant -- a superb political performance in the face of a substantial climb-down.

Is it true that an American invasion was planned? That is more for you to say than for me. But Khrushchev must have assumed that the Americans were prepared to move in. Since he was not prepared to force nuclear war, he acted wisely.

How long do you think it will be before another Soviet move? A week or so. Seriously, I don't believe that the Russians are convinced that they cannot move. I think that they are scared. But I don't blame them in this, I was too. But nothing really has changed. We must ourselves prepare for a test of nerves. On Berlin? Possibly.

What is the situation on the India-China border? We are as puzzled as Nehru why the Chinese are trickling over the Himalayas. This seems to be unlikely to be a major operation. We must remember though, that whereas Kennedy and Khrushchev attempt to send men to the moon and demonstrate their technical capacity, the Chinese as yet have nothing as yet to demonstrate. They may have resorted to the older forms of self-expression -- that is, conquest and mutilation of their neighbours. The whole thing has had a remarkable influence on the Indians. Nehru is now talking about the old British army tradition in the frontier.

What will Britain send to India? Nothing except on a commercial basis, so far. That is, we supply the money and they buy it. Both you and we have been sending mostly logistical material -- lorries, etc. We do supply anything that they want. It may be, since the MIGs has fallen through that they will turn more to English or American aircraft.

How close do you think the world was to nuclear war last week? Much closer than I liked. I don't want to go further. One lesson is that the Western deterrent does work. The fact was that the people who make the final decisions in the world realised that nuclear war was the only option left, and they drew back. In the post-nuclear age, if the Russians were to have acted as they have in the Western hemisphere or in Berlin, there already would have been a world war.

Is there any thought of sending British troops to India? I cannot say that there is no consideration for it. If a request came it would be very carefully considered. We try to stand with the Commonwealth. But Nehru is unlikely to ask us for troops on the North-West frontier. His request would more likely be for lorries or for aircraft.

Could Britain find the troops without cutting her other commitments? She could in the same sense that France found them for Algeria. We could withdraw them from Europe or use our strategic reserve in this country. That is the object of mobility, and we could do it. It is a matter of judgment whether this would be wise or whether it should be extensive.

Is there any thought of deploying the RLF transport command? We have had no request, but we could consider it.

Are you confident that you will get Skybolt missiles from the United States? We have got to have them as we have stopped the orders for others. ✓

What is your opinion about a European deterrent? The same as with the British deterrent. There will be an independent deterrent in Europe. People will want this because they will feel that if Soviet ICBMs are pointed towards Washington, while we are confident that America would come to our aid, we cannot be absolutely certain that the Russians would be confident. Thus it is a kind of re-insurance — and independent deterrent, that is why we and the French have independent nuclear programmes.

How do you feel about nuclear weapons for Germany? This would be a serious and dangerous step if Germany started to develop them on her own. I don't think she will do so. Many Germans argue against it. Part of the argument for a European deterrent is that it would give the Germans the sense of sharing.

What sort of problem for NATO does the American action without consultation hold. You can ask this more appropriately of NATO. As a practical reality, independent judgments have to be made. America couldn't carry on if it had to get full approval for every act. Occasions arise when she has to make up her mind. She did in this instance, and I am very glad she did.

Did you get any satisfaction in the United States on inter-dependence in Western weapons? The British are hopping mad with the Americans over Blue Water plus the decision to send missiles to Israel ( we tried for years not to sell weapons to Israel, and the Americans did it behind our backs ). Blue Water was less good than the American Sergeant, but we would have had it a year earlier. We feel bad on the point, but we tried our best. I don't think the Americans are in a position to do as much in the way of interdependence as I would like. The day may come when we shall ~~not~~ have to share more. At the moment the idea that the Americans would be dependent on others in major weapons development is not well received. So we have to turn more and more to Europe for inter-dependence. We are not in the Common Market yet, but I am a great believer in it. I think we will be in — and for more than trade. This means an approach to common defense. We are already going ahead with a European space launcher, and a supersonic airliner. I hope we can beat the United States in this. The co-operation is good.

Did you need Blue Water for the British army on the Rhine? One of the things we must consider is the role which tactical nuclear weapons may have. They are not substitutes for conventional artillery. If once we shoot them, we would have to go all the way. There is a vast lot of them. American thinking in America ( which differs from that in Europe ) holds that we had better keep them under tight control. I think that this is wise and prudent. We do not need to replace Blue

Water. I doubt whether there is really a need for Sergeant in vast quantities. We had better see how best we can use the large numbers we have. There are other possibilities. A vertical take-off plane with nuclear weapons. This next move is to see how best we can pool our weapons.

Will Britain buy more electronic equipment from the U.S., we do, but this is awkward. There is some prejudice against exaggerated American "security" precautions which hold us down in our own exports. That is, American regulations on certain components we use prevent us from selling these. Many of these rules are obsolete and ought to be revised. Is there any tightening of your own security as the result of the Vassall case? The tightening occurred much before Vassall. Vassall wouldn't have understood a nuclear weapon if he had seen one.

Is Norstad unhappy about British manpower in Europe? Everyone has the highest admiration for Norstad, who has done a magnificent job. It is his job to say that our forces are inadequate, but we can't go above 55,000 men. This is a vast weight upon us and it is causing us much foreign exchange. How these should be organised is another question. I do think that NATO ought to ~~start planning its strategy in light of the forces likely to be available~~ start planning its strategy in light of the forces likely to be available. It is counterproductive to ask for what it is not likely to get. Britain has roles in the outside world which the United States think are highly important. The area between Singapore and Suez is one of these. We couldn't move out of this territory in order to re-inforce Europe without a sharp reaction from the Pentagon.

Are missile bases in Turkey obsolete? They are largely obsolescent like the Thors here, and we have already said that we are getting rid of the Thors. The Soviet missiles in Cuba are almost as obsolescent. These would have been no great contribution to the Russian striking force, for the Russians already have all they need. Most such forces are now obsolescent in view of later weapons. But we should not be in a rush to take out Turkish missiles. The Russians have a great mass of their own in Europe. It is a question of military judgment where we should spend the money. But we should not be frightened.

What impact has the Cuban development had on British domestic political parties? Not a great one. The importance of Cuba was that it showed that Kennedy was prepared to ~~meet~~ his demands against great public pressure to the smallest he could get away with, and that he made certain to get them, and he looked into the cannon's mouth. But there is no great party advantage here. People don't remember successes. For example, our act on in Kuwait may have saved a world war, and it went off brilliantly. But all that is remembered is the failures.

Do you have any greater hope now for arms control? I would be jolly careful. Khrushchev had not suddenly become an angel. He is just scared. I would not assume that we will suddenly get a solution to all the world's problems. Khrushchev will renew his pressures, and will recover face in some other quarter. We should not neglect the opportunity for arms control, but I don't think we are dealing with

a different man. He is no less dangerous and he is not our friend. We can keep him scared by not letting up and by not allowing too many divisions in the West. Last week was a good demonstration of allied solidarity.

Do you think a possible unilateral action by the Americans may come about on Berlin? This is very different from Cuba. You would be wise to carry at least some of the major European powers with you.

Do you think NATO ought to come to the directorate concept of de Gaulle? Here we have to look towards ways in which some of France's ambitions can be met. However awkward de Gaulle may be, France is a great rich and wonderful country. We have got to carry a bit of French support in what we do. Thus we must feel our way to help them in whatever manner possible.

Do you think a third force likely in Europe? I would hope that there would be more a European deterrent, working with the United States. If Britain goes into Europe, the de Gaulle idea of a narrow Europe will alter something more broadly based. Britain would support Benelux the Germans and look across the Atlantic. Thus the tendency would be to strengthen the Atlantic alliance. The trends are starting for political, economic, and defense measures all to be based together in the Atlantic alliance -- or away from it, depending upon the decision.

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